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The Vision of Anton-

by

Walter A. Dyer

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The
VISION OF ANTON

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Robert M. Hutchins

May 7, 1939

The
VISION OF ANTON

BY

WALTER A. DYER

Taken from the author's book
"THE RICHER LIFE"

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The VISION OF ANTON

THE VISION OF ANTON

The Watch-Maker

ONCE upon a time there lived a near-sighted and obscure clockmaker in an ancient town in Flanders. It was in fourteen hundred and something, at about the time when new continents were being discovered, and old continents were being ransacked for whatever might serve to enrich the life of Europe. We call it the period of the Renaissance, and this is the story of the renaissance of Anton, the Flemish clockmaker.

Anton was apprentice to an old craftsman who made clocks to help very rich people to know the time

of day. No one but the rich could afford to buy clocks in those days, so the old clock-maker needed but one assistant. They were crude clocks with but one hand, but they served the purpose. Anton, however, had a soul in his body, and he became very tired of bending eternally over his work bench, making one-handed clocks for people he didn't know. His was a restless sort of soul, but a starved one, and it didn't know how to show Anton the way to better things.

So Anton decided to find out for himself. As he went about the streets of a Sunday he heard of the good gray monks that lived beyond the hill. He was told that they were wise and kind, and that they made sure their entrance into Heaven by many prayers and much

fasting. They were so good that they had time enough left from their prayers to engage in scholarly pursuits. In short, they lived an ideal kind of existence and one that Anton thought would satisfy the cravings of his soul.

So one day Anton left the old clock-maker and journeyed over the hill to the monastery of the good gray monks. They took him in as a lay brother and set him to weeding the garden; but soon they learned that he was skilled with tools, and they gave him the task of building the new altar in the chapel.

When the altar was nearly finished, the abbot of the monastery came to Anton and said: "My son, I perceive that thou hast much cunning. Canst thou carve a legend for the front of the altar?"

"I can, Father," said Anton.

So the abbot sought for a legend that would fit the space on the front of the altar, and after much searching he brought to Anton this:

"Where there is no Vision, the people perish."

Anton accordingly selected a piece of hard, close-grained oak, and began to carve the legend. Now Anton possessed enough of the craftsman's soul to make him strive to carve the legend well, and he spent many days and took infinite pains. And as he worked he said the words:

"Where there is no Vision, the people perish."

He found himself wondering what these words meant, and as he carved his perplexity grew upon him. At last he could contain himself no longer, and he went to the

abbot. "Holy Father," said he, "I am much troubled to know the meaning of the words thou hast given me to carve."

Now the abbot had selected the legend without great thought. It sounded well, and it was the right length. So he made answer lightly. "Those, my son, are the words of a Wise Man of old. They refer to that divine guidance which saves men's souls, and which comes only through prayer and fasting."

But Anton had prayed and fasted, and no Vision had come to him. He asked his brother monks to explain the words to him, but they could not satisfy him, and Anton nearly went mad in the endeavor to understand.

When the carving was complete and the altar finished, Anton found

no more work that interested him. He looked about him, and saw the monks feasting and fasting, praying and working, but he could not discover to what purpose.

"If it be true that without a Vision the people perish," he said to himself, "shall we not all perish? Not even the good gray monks have a Vision. They know not what a Vision is."

So gradually he became dissatisfied with the monotonous life of the good gray monks, and their tiresome prayers and fastings to save their souls, until at last he could stand it no longer, and, never having taken the vows, he left the monastery. It was then that he bethought himself of the old clockmaker for whom he had worked in the town. He remembered how

wise he was, and he sought the familiar shop. The old clock-maker was glad of the return of so good a workman, and received him joyfully. Then Anton told his story—how he had longed for something to satisfy his soul, how he had failed to find it even among the good gray monks, and how the words of the legend had perplexed him.

Then spake the wise old clock-maker. "A Vision," quoth he, "is something good and lofty and desirable which the soul may see, and having not, may reach forth to obtain. Without a Vision the body may live, but the soul is starved. It is death in life. Men may eat, and drink, and sleep, and laugh, and work, and quarrel, and beget children, and die, but all to no purpose.

They might as well die in the first place, and so the Wise Man saith, 'Without a Vision, the people perish.' "

"And what may I do to get a Vision, that I may live?" asked Anton.

"He that seeketh, findeth," replied the clock-maker.

"Where shall I seek?" asked Anton.

"At thine own work bench," was the answer. "Thou hast been to the monastery of the good gray monks and found no Vision there. Thou may'st travel the world over, and no Vision will reward thy search. Look within thy heart, Anton, even into its hidden corners. Whatsoever thou findest that is good and worthy, examine it. Thus wilt thou find thy Vision. Do thy daily work, Anton, and let thy

Vision find thee working. Then shalt thou be ready to receive it, and the meaning of thy life and work will be made clear to thee."
Anton marvelled at the words of the wise old man, and pondered them in his heart as he went back to work at his bench. And every day he talked with the old clock-maker, and strove to learn, until at last the light broke in upon him, and he understood. For the meaning of the legend appears only through much thought and self-examination.
A day come when the old clock-maker arose no more from his bed, and Anton took his place as master of the shop.
"Now," he said, "I will see if I can find a way to work with a Vision, for I know it is better than to work without one."

Every Sunday he went through the market place and talked with his fellow-townsmen. He found that there were many things good and lofty and desirable that were lacking in their lives, but he could discover no way to supply them. His soul was reaching forth, but it had not yet laid hold on a Vision.

One day in his shop, however, a Vision came to him. It was a little Vision, to be sure, but it was a beginning.

"I cannot give bread to all the poor, or bring happiness to the miserable," he said. "I know only how to make clocks. So I will make a clock for the people, that they may have what only the rich may buy." So he set to work and built a huge clock, with two hands, like one he had seen that came from the South.

Its face was two cubits across, and it was fashioned to run in all weathers. Beneath the face he carved and painted a legend:

"Where there is no Vision, the people perish."

In twelve months the clock was done, and he received permission to place it on the tower in the market place, where all men might see it and read the time of day. Many came and saw, and learned to tell the time from the figures on the dial, and the clock became famous throughout Flanders.

But there were many in the countryside who seldom came to the town, and so never were benefited by the clock, and it occurred to Anton one day that the reason for this was that the roads were so poor. He was now a man of substance and

influence in the town, so he went to the burgomaster and told him that he would like to build better roads for the country people to use in coming to town. It took him a long time to make the fat burgomaster see this Vision, but at last he succeeded, and the upshot of the matter was that in a few years there were fine, smooth roads running in all directions.

Anton's fame spread throughout Flanders, and to make a long story short, the king at last sent for him and made him a counsellor at the royal palace. This gave him a chance to broaden his Vision. He saw a greater and a happier Flanders, with the people prosperous in trade and industry and art, and when he died, full of years and honor, he left Flanders a better

place because of his Vision. Anton the clock-maker was one who did not live in vain.

Because we are men and not beasts of the field we all have a desire within us, however small and ill-nourished, not to live in vain. That is the germ of a Vision, and it is for us to say whether or not we shall give heed to it and live by it. We may be automata, in some respects, but we have at least this birthright to do with as we choose. If we are thoughtful persons, we are asking ourselves how we can make our lives worth living. That is, after all, the great motive underlying human history and individual endeavor. I submit that the way so to live is to formulate and cultivate a Vision. That we are alive and needs must labor to live is a fact so

commonplace as almost to escape notice. That our living and working may be in vain is a thought that troubles us when we take time to look eternal verities in the face. And we must take the time; else we are beasts of the field, for they, too, live and labor to live.

To us alone of all creatures is given the power to enrich our lives by taking thought of the spiritual side, for it is the spiritual in us that makes us men and not beasts. If we neglect the spiritual, we take a step backward toward the monkey and the amœba; if we cultivate it, we press on toward our divine goal, and open up for ourselves wide vistas of a richer and altogether more desirable life. To realize this is to prepare the way for the definite Vision.

Many men seem to be living and working without any Vision. Or, if it may be called a Vision, it is a mean and sordid one. This is one of our American faults. Sometimes we Americans wonder what it is that makes life in the Old World seem mellower and richer. Some of us have stopped work long enough to take a breath and look about us, and we find ourselves wondering what it was that made the Elizabethan period in England a golden age. Let us just consider those Elizabethans for a moment. They seem to have prospered as well as we, and yet they managed to get their noses away from the grindstone, somehow. They found time to live a spacious and varied life. They planted England's finest gardens, built her most luxurious

manor-houses, wrote her greatest poems and plays, fought great battles on the seas, set out for adventures in the New World—in short, they made their lives worth living, and when they were gone the world found that they had not lived in vain. We are accustomed to think of them as light-hearted pleasure-seekers, but they could not have thus lived and produced results without a Vision.

There once lived a group of later Elizabethans in this country. They were country gentlemen, soldiers, scholars, lawyers, financiers, architects, travelers, men of affairs and culture. They, too, had a Vision, and lived not in vain. Washington, Franklin, Hamilton, Jefferson—did they not live the richer life? Were they content to be clock-makers or

monks? Rest for a moment from that pressing business of yours and think of it. Did they lack anything that you stand any chance of getting? And did they not have vastly more?

As a people we have had a sort of Vision—a commercial Vision—and we have made the world to stand in wonder because of it. Our material progress has been indeed phenomenal. But our Vision has been a narrow and restricted one. It has not enriched our lives as it should have done. Something is the matter with it.

As individuals we are prone to err in the same direction. Either as clock-makers or as monks we bind ourselves to our little tread-mill, and we get nowhere. Only by giving our souls a chance can we find

the richer life. Without a Vision we only half live.

Now a Vision does not necessarily mean a wholly altruistic ideal. You and I have our own lives to live, though we realize the importance of living for others as well. Nor are we bound to live for posterity alone. We must take our own lives, as they are, and give them some guiding Vision to make them worth while to ourselves, and through ourselves, to others. We must make ourselves bigger, for little men can do little good.

To take examples that loom large enough to be seen of men, we have all known presidents of the United States who have had no Vision. They may have been honest and patient and wise. They may have discharged the duties of the day

ably and conscientiously. But when they passed from office they left small impress. The other sort is too easily recognized to need naming—men who have seen the Vision of a young country growing from helpless infancy to lusty strength, or a sundered country knit together by unbreakable ties, or a too complacent country awakened to insidious dangers within it and the dire needs of posterity. It is easy to pick out the men of Vision from those of no Vision.

Now there is a wide difference between Dreams and a Vision, though they are related. Both are dependent upon that attribute of the human mind which we know by the name of imagination. Imagination is a gift without price. The beasts of the field have no imagination;

the Man with the Hoe has little; the great men of all ages, from Abraham down, have been men of vigorous imagination. Imagination has been a mighty force in the development of the human race. Jerusalem and Rome were imagined before they were built. Without imagination there can be no upward striving.

In some people imagination takes the form of Dreams, and Dreams are but the fluttering of the imagination. A Dream makes no far and lofty flight. It vanishes before it is captured. It is the aimless wandering of the spirit. Some poetry has been built on Dreams, but little else.

Now a Vision—a creative Vision—is a pictured goal. There is purpose and vigor in it. It is productive of

results. And the loftier the Vision, the higher the attainment.

Some of us have to fight against this wasting of the imaginative force in fruitless dreaming. Dreaming is natural in childhood, while the will is yet in a plastic state. Dreaming of the past is an old man's pleasure. But for the young and virile, there should be a Vision and not Dreams. And if we find we have formed the dreaming habit, we have simply got to learn to harness our Dreams and make a Vision of them. For a Vision is necessary to the highest achievement.

But the stronger contrast appears between the man of Vision and the man of no Vision. It is my contention that a man of no Vision is of little more use in the world than a horse, or at best, a good dog; and

I believe that if we discover our lack of a Vision in time, we can create, or formulate, or cultivate one. And this we must do if we want the richer life.

Now we must bring this thought home, if it is to amount to anything. I can but suggest the thought; you must carry it through and apply it to your own needs and circumstances. I believe that each of us can broaden and elevate and enrich his individual life by strengthening whatever Vision he may have, and living with it. It may be only a little Vision, but it will be a beginning. "Eat, drink, and be merry" is the slogan of the man of no Vision; so is "Work, for the night cometh," unless we have a clearly defined idea of what we are working for. Thoughtlessness and labor bondage

are both doors that close out the Vision.

If you are a poet or a preacher, a duke or a doctor, or just a plain, everyday family man or housewife, you have opportunity enough to glorify the day's work by adding unto it a Vision. Then you will try to do good instead of merely maintaining a pastorate; you will deliver a message to the world instead of merely acquiring poetic laurels; you will save lives instead of merely building up a practice; you will make a home happier instead of merely paying off a mortgage. This is what I mean by working with and living by a Vision. Thus only may you grow and enrich your life and that of many about you. "Where there is no Vision, the people perish."

When the Vision faded, Rome and Jerusalem passed away.

I shall never forget a picture once drawn for a class of students by a keen-minded professor of biology. He was trying to explain certain processes of evolution to a group of sophomores whose thoughts were mostly out on the ball field. He showed how one creature, back in the early ages, was thrown up on land and was forced either to grow legs or perish. And when the legs weren't sufficient for all of his descendants, some of them grew claws and teeth as well. Another creature developed the ability to fly from pursuit, and another preferred quiet, stalking habits and a venomous fang. So, different types were developed, as different needs arose, until one creature was at last forced

to stand upright and gain greater brain activity and skill with the hands in order to exist amid stronger and swifter adversaries.

But away back near the beginning there was a creature that soon found a safe and easy haven. He grew a hard shell that was proof against all his enemies; he increased the functions of mouth and stomach to absorb food from the water about him; he had no need to run from pursuers, nor to go forth in search of food; he toiled not, neither did he fight. He has lived thus for countless ages, in the soft, luxurious mud, safe, well nourished, contented. He long ago reached a state of perfect economic balance. What could be more desirable? Have we not many of us longed for a state like this?

"But," cried the professor, leaning far over his desk, and shaking a long, warning finger at us, "who wants to be an oyster?"

And the oyster, I think you will agree, is primarily a creature without a Vision.

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